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Demo Graphics

2424 Emmet installation reveals shared humanity prior to its razing

by [Michael J. Krainak](#)

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An artistic license can take one to strange places. There are no boundaries to one's imagination, passion and freedom if a bonafide card carrying member of the profession.

Just ask Omaha artist Watie White what drew him to an abandoned inner city home on the North side, and his answer falls easily under the umbrella of all his inspiration no matter the project past or present.

"I remain insatiably curious," White says. "The content within my work bears some relationship to the slippery humanist values of truth and honesty."

It was curiosity and a desire to create onsite public art in at-risk neighborhoods that brought him to 2424 Emmet, currently owned by Habitat for Humanity and awaiting demolition sometime soon this month.

But not before White, with the assistance of artist Peter Cales, converted the skeletal remains of this urban legend into a found art installation he calls, *All That Ever Was, Always Is*. This public art project consists of 30 large colorful prints embedded into the window frames that tell the story, or more accurately tell one story, of this

abandoned home and its past inhabitants that for several generations weathered what the Old Testament called, “days of heaven and nights of hell.”

Each of these windows depicts a narrative or portrait inspired by the family Ware/Smith that occupied the residence over the past 40 years or so. The saga ended when the last family member walked away leaving behind a “treasure” of photos, journals, news clippings and other personal memorabilia, all of which White was privy to. This and additional research, as well as neighborhood interviews, served as source material for his original paintings, the prints of which stare back at the viewer like the proverbial ghosts that must haunt castaways, foreclosures and eyesores like this all over the Metro and rural area.

The reality of this prodigious endeavor, which includes benches and planters White and Cales made from found objects left behind, has been public for over a month ever since its well attended opening in February as people all over the city shared the artists’ curiosity. Who did live at 2424 Emmet and what really went on in this house that on the face of it looks like a setting from HBO’s revelatory series, “The Corner”.

Yet, aesthetically and socially, as the title more than hints at, this installation is interested in more than mere documentation. Anyone familiar with White’s oeuvre, truth is a kaleidoscopic mix of fact, perception, interpretation and myth with a capital “M”.

As evidenced by past series, *Pulp*, *Stolen* and *Verbatim*, White has proven to be not only one of the most versatile artists in this area but one of most consistently creative, reinventing himself as he goes. One motif continues to unite all his work: a virtual anthropological zeal to reveal the human condition in all its diversity as expressed as in traditional media using realist based formal language.

Whatever the viewer takes away from this installation by way of interpretation or perhaps just recognition, White’s POV remains open and humanistic. His paintings were created with live models who were encouraged to interpret dramatically their characters based upon some aspect of the family dynamic, its personal record and neighbor’s accounts.

All 30 paintings feature grandparents, parents, siblings, in-laws and acquaintances lost in thought or engaged in family rituals and conflict without the benefit of easy resolution. It was by all accounts, an active, outgoing household, troubled at times by rumors of drug sales, abuse and prostitution. Whatever 2424 suffered, its drama and reputation was not helped by the circumstances of its abandonment.

None of which will never be known as White didn't pursue the details that would have focused on or isolated just one family's narrative. He was after something more. Yes, his investigation did discover that grandfather Ware was a Pullman Porter, daughter Janet married Omaha policeman Leonard Smith and son Michael may have been the home's last occupant. But White never interviewed any family member to sort out the "dirt" or give credence to the gossip. Nor does he attempt to dispel it.

Even more, the imagery is never judgmental. Each scenario is relevant to a room in the house as it stares back at the viewer, or voyeur. Each work has a soul as well as story, and the point of view is not unlike what passerbies or next door neighbors and snoops must have witnessed in real time. Though each window is one piece of the puzzle, there are no "aha" moments or Rosebud revelations. The whole is either greater or less than its parts depending on whether you are looking for empathy or answers as to what makes a family, any family, tick.

If White has a philosophical muse, it's the late Joseph Campbell who, in a series of lectures and PBS specials, "The Power of Myth," made several observations about our shared humanity. Campbell said, "We must let go of the life we planned so as to accept the one that is waiting for us," a reckoning that may have come to pass for some of this home's occupants.

The key word here is "we," as it ties us into what reverberates throughout this installation. When we stop looking at the metaphors of neighborhood, architecture, dress, race and more, we begin to see what these prints reveal about us all. In that light, they become less windows into a single, secret life and more the mirror images of ourselves.

White achieves this transformation as he has in the past with an aesthetic that includes: an acrylic-based palette that is bright and cheerful on the surface but

suitably transparent and ghostly. His style is gestural and expressive as characters tend to wear their feelings and attitude on their sleeves as they play out their drama in public and private. Note too White's use of priority, asymmetrical composition that directs the viewer's eye throughout the frame with an expressionistic angle, a subjective depth of field and provocative body language.

There are no titles, no names to help one identify family members. Instead, the artist uses a time-honored system of symbolic color to heighten emotion and conflict. Male figures, such as grandpa Ware, a son-in-law and grandson, all appear in cool colors of blue and green, and females, including the dominant mother of the household and her daughter, wear purple, red and orange. It's a familiar gender distinction of detachment and passion to anyone raised in a traditional family.

In perhaps the most evocatively understated image, a triptych of daughter Candice's room upstairs, the barefooted, Afro-haired protagonist sits at her window with her legs up while lost in meditation. As to what she daydreams of, White provides enough clues with imagined airplanes, a floating, handsome male portrait and a mural of the world on the back wall. Candice's heart and vision lay elsewhere.

What she may be trying to escape both literally and figuratively can be seen in the family squabble in the dining room as Candice witnesses exchanges of disapproval between mother and father at an evening meal. Domesticity may not have much appeal for her, but it's too late for mom. In one kitchen scenario, grandpa and grandson stand in a doorway with a huge stringer of fish while mom has her hands buried in dish water. The head of the household breaks the third wall and stares back at the viewer as if to say, "See what I have to put up with...a woman's work is never done."

As a virtual condescension to gossiping neighbors, White includes a five part narrative that hints at the underlying chaos that may have underscored 2424's demise. In a symbolic barbeque on the front porch, family and friends dance and carry on around a flaming grill in a fire and brimstone ritual right out of Genesis. Or it may just be a cathartic release after a week of frustration in the inner city. Either way, it's one of White's finest pieces ever, the flipside to his more contemplative "Candice at the Window." A life and its expression in the balance.

White hopes to dismantle the installation, prints, wood frames and all, and reinstall this window of opportunity in a major arts venue in the near future. For the sake of closure, maybe the artist should follow Habitat for Humanity's example and let this set of prints go down in the rubble of the demo along with the artifacts, rumors and metaphors alike.

Sometimes you have to raze the past before you can raise hope for the future, no matter whose, no matter the location.

All That Ever Was, Always Is *continues onsite at its location at 2424 Emmet until its demolition. For more details, contact watie@watiewhite.com.*

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Visual Art Review

by **Michael J. Krainak**

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